

2012.3.391 Bruce Thrasher

Crystal Perez: This is Crystal Perez. Today is February 23rd 2012, and I am interviewing Kelly Thrasher and Kathy Bruce in Decatur, Georgia for the DeKalb History Center. Ms. Thrasher is the Public Relations Manager at the Waffle House Museum, and Ms. Bruce's uncle was one of the founders of the Waffle House, and also, her father built the first Waffle House. How long have both of you been associated with the Waffle House Museum? Obviously, you've always been associated through your family members, but how long how you been associated, Kelly?

Kelly Thrasher: Well, I worked for the Waffle House corporate office for about 7 ½ years, and then the museum opened in September of 2008. So, I've been involved with the museum since the museum opened.

CP: OK. And, are you both from Georgia?

KT: Yes.

Kathy Bruce: Yes, I am, too.

CP: Where in Georgia are you from?

KT: I'm from Dunwoody, Georgia.

KB: And, I am from Avondale Estates.

CP: OK. So, you're both DeKalb County residents, pretty much for all your life.

KT: Pretty much.

CP: OK. What can you tell me about growing up in DeKalb County?

KT: Well, I wasn't born here, but I basically lived here until I was about 1 or...since I was 1, then went to high school, left to go to the University of Georgia, and then came back. And, I actually live in Dunwoody, again.

CP: OK.

KT: So, I'm still a resident of DeKalb County. [laughs]

CP: Where did you go to high school?

KT: I went to Dunwoody High School.

CP: You went to Dunwoody. OK. And, what about you, Kathy?

KB: And, I was born in Avondale, actually was born 2 doors down from Tom, the founder. And, grew up there for about 4, 5 years. Then, we moved to a street called

Glenn Drive, which is in Avondale, and I lived there until I got married and moved away. And, I went to Avondale High School. And, I remember, specifically, Avondale Lake. It's still there, with the ducks. We had a big...we would always go down there. After I got married and had children, we still went down there. So, that was a big part of Avondale and still is, today.

CP: OK. And, in both of your opinions, how has DeKalb changed from when you were growing up until now?

KT: I can tell just from, like, a retail perspective. I remember...I live close to Perimeter Mall...I can remember when Ashford Dunwoody was 2-lane street, and now it's just lined with shopping centers, and the mall has definitely grown. So, I can tell huge...from a retail perspective, it's definitely grown a lot.

KB: And, it has grown a lot, but I can also tell there is a lot at Avondale that's still like it was when I was small. You know, Avondale hadn't changed a lot, as far as the stores and you know...that type of thing. So, there's a lot of beautiful homes that were built in the 50s that are still there, and I see a lot of it as I ride through, still being the same.

CP: That's true. They're actually trying to do a lot of preservation over there in the Avondale area. Were you aware of that?

KB: Right. Yes.

CP: Did you grow up in one of those older homes?

KB: My father built one in 19...probably 5...5, maybe.

CP: OK.

KB: So, it's older now, but it was new when we moved in.

CP: Right. And, did you say that you still live in the Avondale...

KB: No.

CP: ...area?

KB: I live in Sandy Springs, now.

CP: You live in Sandy Springs, now.

KB: I moved away from Avondale when I went to college.

CP: Oh, OK. OK, and, both of you, growing up, did either of you go to the Waffle House?

KT: I, actually, didn't go to the Waffle House that often, as a child. I went some through high school and a little bit at college. And then, obviously, when I started working for Waffle House, I frequented it a whole lot more. [laughs]

CP: Right.

KT: But, it was never for not wanting to. I just...the opportunity was never...was never right there.

CP: Right.

KB: And, with me, of course, we went there a lot on Sunday, after church, with Tom and his family. And, would sit at the 14 stools that were. So, yes, we went frequently to the very first Waffle House.

CP: And, considering that church is a big part of life for many southerners, what was the Waffle House like on Sunday afternoons, when you would go there?

KB: Well, I don't really remember...

CP: [laughs]

KB: ...exactly, but I do know that, of course there're 14 stools, and if they were full, then they had benches for you to wait on. And, I remember going after church, and I don't remember waiting. I just remember eating, and...you know. And, then the adults would sit there, and we would go out and play in the parking lot with my cousins.

CP: Ok. So, it wasn't necessarily a after church hangout.

KB: Not that I remember.

CP: OK. How did the Waffle House become the Waffle House? Just tell a little bit of the history, if you can.

KT: Sure. Actually, Joe Rogers, Sr. and Tom Forkner were neighbors. Tom Forkner, actually, sold a house to Joe Rogers when he moved to Avondale Estates. And, so...and Joe Rogers worked for a restaurant company called the Toddle House. And, the Toddle House was a 24-hour restaurant business, and Tom really kept telling Joe, "I think we should open a Toddle House in Avondale Estates." And, for one reason or other, they were like, "I don't know if this is the right pace for a Toddle House, or..." And, years went by. And, Tom convinced Joe that...he was like, "if I build you a restaurant, you can show me how to run it." And, that's where the Waffle House was born. And, so, they opened the very first Waffle House on Labor Day of 1955 in Avondale Estates.

CP: OK. And, Tom is Kathy's uncle.

KB: Correct.

KT: Correct.

CP: Do you remember anything that he used to say about the Waffle House as you were growing up?

KB: I do, and my mother, who is 88, she loves to tell the stories, because she was really involved, and she says she remembers them out in the driveway talking about building a restaurant. They didn't really, you know...hadn't named it the Waffle House, and my father said, "I wish y'all would just quit talking about it and do it." He said, "I have a perfect spot for it." And, he had a white house on...where the Waffle House is now. He said, "I'll take that house down, and we'll build the restaurant right there, and that'll be a perfect spot." So, that's how that was.

CP: OK. Why do you think or do you know that...what is the reason for the Waffle Houses being open as it is, on 24 hours, 365 days a year?

KT: Well, the Toddle House, which Joe...excuse me, Joe, Sr. came from, It was a 24-hour restaurant business. And, so, Joe felt that if they're going to open a restaurant that's going to service the community, it needs to service the community 24 hours. So, I think

he was kind of going off the business plan of the Toddle House, but then realized you need to provide a service all the time.

CP: That makes sense. And, the Toddle House was also 24 hours.

KT: Correct.

CP: Do you know if there were any more restaurants that were open 24 hours at the time that they opened it?

KT: I do not know.

CP: OK. Do all Waffle Houses look the same? They're distributed throughout the country, obviously, there are some in...there aren't any in some areas, and there are many in other areas, but do they all look the same no matter which one you go into?

KT: For the most part, they have a very similar design. It's kind of a shoebox-type design. All of them have open kitchens, where you can see everything that's going on. Some of them may vary in the size of...as how many people they will seat. A typical Waffle House has about 33, or so, seats for capacity, but we have some that go up as much as 60...some are the 40s. The standard is in the 30s, from 33-seater, but they do vary, slightly, but they all have the same kind of décor. They...you...they're all recognizable as a Waffle House.

CP: Right. And, all across the South, and especially Georgia, the Waffle House is definitely a landmark in the landscape. No matter where you go, especially around Atlanta. What makes Waffle House different from other restaurants that makes people view it as a landmark and part of the culture, you think?

KT: I think a lot of people...they like to go to Waffle House for the food, but I really think, more so, people go to interact with the people. We like to pride ourselves on being very, like, personable, and customer interaction is the key piece. Of course, we want to provide quality food at a great value, but a lot of it really is about people. And, you'll talk to associates who have worked for us for 30 years, and we'll ask them, "why do you stay? Why do you stay at Waffle House?" And, like, "it's because I love my customers." Or "I love the people I work with." Almost every person's answer is, "I stay because of the people."

KB: And, I can add to that. When I'm doing the museum, I have people come in, and they always are talking about "their" Waffle House, "my" Waffle House, you know.

CP: Mmmhmm.

KB: And, some of them go everyday. I've had customers that go twice a day, and it's like a family. [...]

CP: Wow. OK. And, as far as the design of the Waffle House sign...now, they have block letters. But, the original Waffle House sign design is different. What was the reasoning behind the creation of that original design?

KT: From my understanding, the original sign was...the way the Waffle House lettering looked...was supposed to look as though it was dripping syrup. So, it almost looks a little ghostly, but it was meant to be dripping syrup. I'm not sure, over the years, where the block lettering came into play, but now the block lettering is the very recognizable, you know, Waffle House trademark.

CP: OK. What type of food is available at the Waffle House?

KT: Waffle House has, pretty much, anything you want. Breakfast...we have lunch options and dinner options. Breakfast is...everything is served 24 hours a day. So, you can get eggs and a waffle or an All-star Breakfast for dinner, or you can get pork chop or a steak for breakfast. We pretty much have every type of American cooking that you can imagine.

CP: Has the menu changed over the years? Or has it stayed pretty consistent?

KB: It's stayed pretty consistent. There's been a few changes. You'll see...we have the first menu, and there was a few things, like pears and cottage cheese, that we don't have anymore. But, a lot of the things...actually, there was a filet mignon on there that...the

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story behind that is that, this was probably in the 60s, they ran out. So, the cook went to the A&P to buy more, and they didn't have any. So, they bought T-Bones instead. So, that's why they are...

CP: Oh.

KB: ...the leading T-Bone...

CP: OK. And, what is the most popular item on the menu, would you say?

KT: Waffles are definitely popular, coffee is actually a very popular item. A lot of people like the cheesesteak melt. I know that's a popular item. So, it's funny because most people come in, and they don't look at the menu at all. They know exactly what they want. They have their favorite meal, and they don't...they don't want to...I think that's probably why things haven't changed much over the years, just because people know what they want, and they know what they like. And, that's what they come to get. And...

CP: Right.

KT: So...

KB: And, you know what? If it's not on the menu, and they want it, then they tell the waitress, "I want...this is how I want my eggs. I want chili on it," or whatever, you know. So, there's a...I've learned through working at the museum that some people don't even go by the...

CP: Oh.

KB: ...menu. They just tell them what they want.

CP: So, they'll make it to order, depending on the customer's taste, I assume if they can.

KT: Right. [laughs]

CP: [laughs]

KT: If we have the items...for the most part, if you want something a little special...

CP: Mmmhmm.

KT: ...they'll usually accommodate your request.

CP: Where do the recipes come from?

KT: A lot of the recipes have come from actual grill operators, themselves.

CP: Oh, OK.

KT: Things that they've, maybe, come up with. Like, the term "scattered, smothered, covered" for the hash browns wasn't something that Waffle House corporate came up with. Its, actually, terms that the grill operators were using to call out orders for the hash browns, on their own, and it was just something that picked up and became, kind of, a company-wide calling. So, a lot of the things are just ideas that, maybe, the grill operators have come up with or...

CP: I would say that's something different that would set you apart from other restaurants, as well.

KT: Absolutely.

CP: Yeah. The Waffle House is associated with a friendly atmosphere, and some people would even say a "homey" atmosphere, and a lot of that has to be attributed to the staff there. What can you say about the staff? How are they picked? What type of personalities? What kind...what kind of personalities do you come across, usually, when you go into a Waffle House?

KT: Well, we definitely have all types of people that are working for us. Usually, the majority of our people, I would say, are very upbeat, very personable. You know, you want to make your customers feel like they're at home. Like you were saying, they want to feel at home...just have, you know, familiar conversations and just trying to keep people, you know, keep them happy and provide them a great service, as well.

CP: So you...I assume that you allow your staff to be pretty informal with the customers that come through the door.

KT: Pretty informal to...there's obviously a

CP: Right.

KT: ...keep some things...[laughs]

CP: ...at a professional level...

KT: But, absolutely. And I...and I think that's why we have so many regular customers. Because, they feel so comfortable with specific associates. For the most part, people work the same schedules, typically like first shift or second shift on certain days of the week. So, people will come in on...they know when certain people are working, that they'd like to see. And, like we said, it's like people know all about each other, and like, "oh, my daughter's had a baby" or you know, "my son got into college." So, it's very

personal, personal information, but it's things you would share with your best friends or your family.

KB: And, I have heard, too, from the museum that they walk in and...they might walk in, and they put a cup of coffee before they've even said anything.

CP: Oh, OK.

KB: They already know what they want.

CP: Right. Is that something that...I don't want to use the word "push," but is that something that's really encouraged by the Waffle House for employees? Is that, I don't want to say a condition of getting the job, but is that something that's really put forth by the Waffle House?

KT: I think it's...I think in any service industry, encouraging to be...you know, to have a good repore with your customers is encouraged. I think at Waffle House they just kind of take it to the next step.

CP: Right.

KT: ...you know, and it's definitely not something that's discouraged, by any means.

CP: Right.

KT: I mean...so, you know, I think a lot of people want to come to have that...they feel comfortable...they never feel like, you know...what's the word I'm looking for? I'm not sure what I'm trying to say...I'm sorry. [laughs]

CP: It's OK. [laughs] Now, I'd like to shift the focus to the museum. How did the museum come to be?

KT: I believe the museum...well, the museum opened on Labor Day, in 1955. And, then it was at that same location until the early '70s. And then, from that point, from my understanding, the gentleman who was the grill operator or the unit manager, at the time, he actually took over the lease on the building and turned...it became a mom and pop type of diner. I am not sure if there were some other businesses during that time, but then it became a Chinese restaurant. That was the most recent business that it was before it became the museum. And then, in the mid 2000s, the lease became available on the building again, and we were like, "wouldn't this be a great idea to turn it into a museum?" The idea was, actually, to turn it into a museum for our 50th anniversary, which was in 2005. It didn't open until 2008. [laughs] But, we decided it would be great to reconstruct it to look as it did in 1955. So, when people walk in, you see how it as set up back in 1955.

CP: Right.

KT: And, then we do also have another portion of the museum that is more like a museum, with memorabilia and different things through the years that you may...that people may find interesting to know about Waffle House.

CP: Where is the museum located?

KT: It's located in Avondale Estates, on East College Avenue, and it is in the exact location that it was when it first opened.

CP: OK.

KB: And, it does have the original floors, there.

CP: Oh.

KB: Everything else has been redone, but the floors are the original floors that were put in in 1955.

CP: OK. And, are there a lot of visitors to the museum? I know there's a schedule that's pretty much atypical for most museums, but considering that, do you find that a lot of people are interested in coming to see the museum?

KB: Well, we have...like Kelly was saying, we have, once a month on Saturdays, we have open house from 12 to 3. And, I believe the first time we opened, we had about 6 or 7 hundred people come through.

CP: Wow.

KB: It just depends on the Saturday. Last Saturday, we maybe had 50, but the Saturday before, we had about 3 or 4 hundred. So, it just depends on the weekend, what's going on with people that weekend or...but, as far as other days, if a church group or someone wants to schedule, then they call the Waffle House Museum or Carolyn, who coordinates it, and then she gets...calls me, and then we set up a time. And, I open up for, you know, ten people, or more. And, last week, I think I was open, maybe two or three times. One group was 50. One was 25. So, they're pretty large groups that come through.

CP: What typically happens when someone does come to tour the museum? What is a typical tour of the museum?

KB: The first...I take them to the orig...the one that's the original Waffle House, where it shows how the seats were set up, and what I'll do is just give them the history of Tom and Joe, how they met, and how the Waffle House began. And, a little history of...you know, of what it was like back then. They have a hat that they can put on. They have a menu, the first menu. And, then they ask questions. They can pretend like they're cooking. You know, they can go back behind the counter, and they take pictures. And,

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then we go back to the commissary. That is where everything was prepped before it was taken out to cook. So, I explain how the hash browns were made back then, and you know, people ask questions. So, then we go next door to the other part of the museum, and there's a great little video that's about 15 minutes that also gives the history of Waffle House.

CP: OK. Are you the only person that does tours at the museum?

KB: If I can't somebody can fill in, but...yeah...

KT: Kathy is the primary tour guide. We do have another young lady that helps us out on the public openings, and then oftentimes if perhaps Kathy's schedule is unab...unavailable, we do have people from our corporate office that can also give tours, as well.

CP: OK. Well, that explains the schedule, then, if there's just one person operating that. When did the original restaurant close and why? Why did that original restaurant close?

KT: I believe it closed in the early '70s, and I'll be honest with you, I'm not 100% sure why that location closed.

CP: OK.

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KB: I can tell you my mother's brother was the first manager of the restaurant, and he...I think he was only there for a couple of years. And, I don't know who...I'm like Kelly, I don't know exactly why it closed.

CP: OK. Who manages the property? Does the Waffle House manage the property?

KT: We do. Our corporate office is in charge of managing the property. So, we do have people that go out to take care of the property from our corporate office.

CP: OK. And, you mentioned that there is some wa...memorabilia there at the museum for people to see. Now, are these things that were saved?

KB: Mmmhmm.

CP: So, these are actually original items...

KB: They are.

CP: ...that you have in the museum.

KB: We have the first calculator. We have, you know, pens from the '60s.

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KT: We have notebooks that Joe Rogers, Sr. drew out, like, little sketches of the building, the original notebooks that he had.

KB: Mmmhmm. His lunch box, you know...a jacket that I don't know if Joe wore it or one of the corporate people wore, a yellow jacket. We have that there. We have the waitress' uniforms from the '60s and maybe from the '80s. We have plates, you know, the first plates and dishes that they had.

KT: We also have some memorabilia that's dedicated to the Toddle House, as well...some original things from the Toddle House, because that's kind of how Waffle House was born.

CP: OK.

KT: ...from the idea of Toddle House.

CP: Right.

KT: So, we do...we do have some, you know, celebration of them, as well. We have many of the different menus through the years. You can see how the menu has evolved by the look of the menu.

CP: Right.

KT: Because, the original menu was a folded menu, and now we have the placemat-type menu. So, it's changed a little bit, although the items on the menu haven't, necessarily, changed. Sometimes the look has changed. Now, there are a lot of pictures. They can see what the items will look like, whereas, at the very beginning, the menu did not have as many pictures.

CP: OK. The Waffle House is legendary, I would say, for its jukeboxes. Obviously, there are still jukeboxes in the store.

KT: Yes.

CP: Did the original Waffle House have a jukebox?

KT: I don't believe the original Waffle House had a jukebox when it first opened. I don't think, like, on opening day they had a jukebox. The jukebox came around, I believe, in the '60s, is when they started putting them in locations. So, in that very first restaurant...when it first opened, it didn't. But, I believe it had one after it had been open for, you know, many years.

CP: Right. And, do they play CDs or do they play records?

KT: Some of them play 45s...

CP: Mmmhmm.

KT: ...And some of them play CDs. It just depends on which jukebox gets put in a certain location. So, they do...we have a couple of different kinds of jukeboxes, and we're actually looking into, kind of, going forward and putting digital jukeboxes in some of our locations, as well.

CP: Wow. [laughs]

KT: So, we're keeping the jukeboxes, we're just evolving the jukebox...

CP: Right. What are "Waffle House Songs?"

KT: We do have some original Waffle House songs. They started in, I want to say, the mid '80s. So, there are songs that are about Waffle House, different things like that. There's some that are actually pretty funny. We still have original songs, today. We're constantly coming up with new ones. So, we have...and we've also done some music videos to some of our songs and posted those on our website, as well.

CP: Are these only available through the Waffle House or can you find them commercial...commercially anywhere else?

KT: Well, we do have CDs. We have a Volume 1 CD and a vol...we just recently opened a volume...released a Volume 2 CD. And, all the proceeds of the Volume 2 CD actually benefit the Marcus Autism Center. It was a promotion or a partnership that we're doing with them to help, you know, raise some money and awareness for the Marcus Autism Center. But, the songs from the Volume 2 CD...they are also available on iTunes, and the proceeds from the iTunes also go to Marcus Autism Center.

CP: Now, you mention the Marcus Autism Center. How else is the Waffle House Corporation involved in the community?

KT: Waffle House is a corporate office...as a corporation, we are...we do a lot of corporate or community-related events, but we also encourage each individual Waffle House to become involved in their community. Each...we kind of encourage them to treat each location as their own business. So, they should get into the, you know, get into the community, get to know their neighbors. So, a lot of them will do partnerships with local schools, local churches, different organizations that they can partner with to help raise awareness or sometimes we'll do Spirit Nights with high schools, where a portion of the sales from that night will go back to the school. It just depends. Each different location does...has different involvement with the locations, but we do encourage it to be on a very local level. So, not just as a company, but very vocal, as well.

CP: OK. I believe in 2006, the Waffle House started accepting credit cards at its locations.

KT: Yes.

CP: What guided that change, and have you seen a difference in profits with that or even with the amount of customers that come to the Waffle Houses?

KT: I think we've had a pretty steady flow, even before we accepted credit cards. Most people who are fans of Waffle House, you know, they're really big fans of Waffle House. And, you find a way to work around it. You know, we were a little...a little late jumping on the credit card bandwagon. But, from my understanding, we just wanted to make sure credit cards were going to be here to stay before we decided to jump in on that. But, we've been very fortunate that we have a great customer base and fan base that...our business has been very steady.

CP: OK. Is there anything else that you'd like to add, that you feel like we may have left out and could be important?

KT: Not that I can think of.

KB: No.

KT: It's like I know so much information.

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KB: I know.

CP: [laughs]

KB: I know. I think we've hit a lot of it.

KT: There's so much information. [laughs]

CP: Ok. Well, one more question.

KT: Sure.

CP: The Waffle House has been designated...the museum has been designated as a DeKalb County landmark...

KT: I believe it's a state landmark.

CP: It's a state landmark, now?

KT: I believe so.

CP: OK. What does this mean for the community and for the Waffle House?

KT: I think it's a really...I think it's very exciting for us. You know, Waffle House has been a staple...I mean, particularly, in Georgia, since this is where we started...we have over 350 restaurants just in Georgia, alone. I believe in just the Atlanta metro area, we have over 250. So, we have a very high concentration in the South. But, we are na...I don't want to say national, we're in 25 states, throughout the country. But, we do...we do kind of have a concentration here, and I don't know if it's, you know, we're just kind of showing love for where we started. But, we're really fortunate...the community of Avondale Estates has always been really great for Waffle House. They are very supportive. They, actually, helped in working with...to get the historic...the historic...

CP: ...designation.

KT: ...designation for us. So, they have just been wonderful and such a great community partner.

CP: OK. Well, that concludes the questions that I've prepared for the interview, and on behalf of DeKalb History Center, I would like to thank you for your time and your contribution to the preservation of DeKalb County's history.

KB: Thank you.

KT: Thank you.